

Remarks of Representative Edward J. Markey (D-MA)
On the Bush Administration's Announcement Regarding Possible Terrorist Attacks This
Summer
May 26, 2004

Today the Bush Administration announced that Al Qaeda may be planning a massive attack this summer against high-profile targets such as the opening of the World War II Memorial in Washington and the national conventions in Boston and New York. This warning follows new intelligence released last night by U.S. counterterrorism and law enforcement officials indicating that a group of terrorists already is deployed inside the United States and is preparing to launch a major attack this summer.

This afternoon, Attorney General Ashcroft called on the American people to stay vigilant, alert authorities if they see suspicious activity, and support law enforcement efforts to prevent terrorism. Clearly, Americans want to help thwart terrorist attacks – they want a safe summer for their families and their neighbors. Americans also want to know that their government is doing its part to keep the country safe – raising our defenses, not just raising red flags.

The warnings we have heard over the past few days are the latest reminder that terrorists are determined to strike us again, on a scale designed to inflict major damage on our country.

In light of today's announcement, we need to evaluate – not just what the Bush Administration is saying about these terrorist threats – but what the Bush Administration is doing to reduce the risk of terrorist attacks that our nation continues to face.

Unfortunately, when it comes to many of our most pressing security loopholes, the Bush Administration's rhetoric has not produced the results needed to make us safer. I'd like to highlight 6 major homeland security loopholes that the Bush Administration needs to close immediately.

First, cargo carried on passenger planes. Almost none of the commercial cargo transported on passenger planes is physically screened for explosives and other dangerous materials before it's loaded onboard. So while passengers empty their pockets, take off their shoes, walk through metal detectors and have their cell phones, laptops, and cameras checked, cargo that DOESN'T EVEN BELONG TO ANYONE

ABOARD THE PLANE sails through security without being inspected and is deposited in the cargo hold right beneath passengers' feet. This is unacceptable.

Last year, I offered an amendment to the spending bill for the Department of Homeland Security to close this dangerous loophole. My amendment passed overwhelmingly. But the Bush Administration sided with the cargo industry, and my amendment was stripped from the bill.

So while intelligence indicates that another attack on a passenger plane remains near the top of Al Qaeda's terrorist target list, the Bush Administration refuses to require 100% inspection of cargo carried on these planes.

The White House claims it's made airline security improvements "from curb to cockpit." But the Bush Administration has by-passed the cargo bay.

This year, I will again offer an amendment to close the cargo loophole.

Second, the threat that a dirty bomb or weapon of mass destruction will be detonated by a terrorist group. Yesterday, a counterterrorism official revealed that there is a special concern that terrorists may possess and use a chemical, biological or radiological weapon that could cause much more damage and casualties than a conventional bomb.

At the same time the threat from a weapon of mass destruction has increased, the Bush Administration is busy trying to eliminate the only Federal program that prepares fire fighters, police officers and other hometown first responders for terrorist attacks using such weapons.

The Metropolitan Medical Response System, or MMRS, provides funding to 125 cities – including Boston, Springfield and Worcester – so that their police and fire departments, hospitals, and public health officials can develop the plans needed to coordinate their response to potentially hundreds or thousands of casualties caused by a terrorist attack using a weapon of mass destruction.

This program is so important, because if a dirty bomb is detonated in one of our cities or towns, residents won't call Washington, DC.

They'll call their local police and fire departments, their local hospital and their local emergency responders, and these responders will need to know how to coordinate their response to save lives and minimize casualties.

In January, the Bush Administration eliminated all the funding for this vital program in its budget for next year. I have been working to reverse this unwise, ill-timed and indefensible decision.

Our first responders are hometown heroes. But even heroes need help.

I recently learned that the Bush Administration was not satisfied with merely eliminating money for the program in next year's budget. The White House also was secretly trying to kill the program by siphoning away its funding in this year's budget.

I have written to Secretary Ridge to protest this cut and reinforce the requirement that Congress must be notified before such shifting of funds can occur. The Homeland Security Department ultimately decided to notify Congress of its proposed elimination of funding for the Metropolitan Medical Response System. I am pleased that, last week,

the appropriations committees in both the House and Senate rejected the Bush Administration's attempt to cut this important program out of this year's budget. I am continuing to fight to save its funding in next year's budget.

Third, security at the LNG terminal in Everett. After the terrorist attacks on September 11th, the Bush Energy Department commissioned a study of LNG safety in Boston Harbor. We now know that this study seriously understated the risk to the citizens of Boston, Everett, and surrounding communities in the event of a terrorist attack against an LNG tanker as it enters the Port of Boston to dock at the Distrigas facility in Everett.

This flawed study was used to reassure Massachusetts officials and the Coast Guard that it was safe to resume LNG shipments to Everett.

It was also used by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which has authority over deciding the location of new LNG facilities, to help approve requests for new LNG terminals at sites around the country.

Despite concerns about terrorist strikes against LNG facilities, the Bush Administration appears unwilling to consider revisions to existing LNG safety regulations to ensure that LNG terminals are located only in remote areas, and that the safety perimeters be expanded to protect the public from the worst case accident or attacks. At the same time,

Republicans in Congress have introduced legislation aimed at preempting state or local governments from having a role in determining the site of LNG facilities in their communities, proposing instead to centralize this authority in Washington, DC.

The Bush Administration should strengthen LNG security standards and improve federal-state coordination on issues affecting LNG. Instead, the Bush White House is not doing enough to reduce terrorist threats against LNG facilities.

Fourth, vehicle screening at airports. Last week, Channel 4's I-Team identified a dangerous security weakness at Logan Airport.

Commercial vehicles operated by contractors were being permitted to enter the airport without being physically inspected and driver's identification were not being routinely checked at the gates.

It turns out that Joe Bergantino discovered a security loophole you could drive a truck through.

Massport has since revised its security plan to address this issue. But while Massport is tightening its vehicle screening policy, there is NO FEDERAL RULE that requires other airports around the country to follow suit. This week, I wrote to Secretary Ridge to urge him to require EVERY AIRPORT to inspect 100% of the vehicles and check 100% of the identification cards of all contractors who are driving commercial vehicles near sensitive areas of the airport.

Fifth, security at nuclear facilities. We know from both Al Qaeda admissions and intelligence reports that terrorists are trying desperately to build dirty bombs or homemade nuclear weapons.

Despite this disturbing information, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission is still operating in a pre-September 11 world. While the NRC and the nuclear power industry have been saying, essentially, “It can't happen here,” we know all too well that the terrorists of Al Qaeda have contemplated and would carry out an attack on a nuclear facility.

The Bush Nuclear Regulatory Commission is supposed to be an industry watchdog – but sadly, it’s increasingly an industry lapdog, hiding behind closed doors with the nuclear energy industry and using security claims to prevent the public from knowing how little it’s doing to keep the reactors safe and secure.

The Bush NRC needs to undertake an immediate rulemaking to upgrade the baseline security standard – the so-called “Design Basis Threat” - to reflect the realistic terrorist threat we face. We should be assuming attacks from “dozens” of terrorists, not just “several.” We should assume assistance from 2-3 “active” insiders, not just a single

“passive” insider. We should assume truck bombs as large as a tractor-trailer, not just an SUV and we should include consideration of air and water-borne attacks instead of merely assuming they won’t happen.

Sixth, security at chemical plants. The Environmental Protection Agency has identified 123 chemical facilities around the country that contain high enough levels of toxic chemicals that a worst-case scenario attack could expose more than 1 million people living in the surrounding area to potentially fatal level of toxins.

Last November, a correspondent with “60 Minutes” visited dozens of chemical plants in major metropolitan areas and found gates unlocked or wide open, dilapidated fences, and unprotected tanks filled with deadly chemicals.

A reporter from the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review has visited 60 plants around the country – including facilities in Chicago, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Houston. According to the 60 Minutes segment, a Pittsburgh Tribune-Review reporter was able to enter the plants and walk right up to storage tanks full of dangerous chemicals without being arrested, or even questioned.

We saw just yesterday that an accidental fire in a chemical warehouse in the suburbs of Atlanta caused the evacuation of 300 people and several hospitalizations. Government researchers have estimated

that if terrorists caused a large release of chlorine in a densely populated area it could kill 100 people PER SECOND.

Despite this glaring vulnerability, the Bush Administration has continued to fight Democrats' efforts to upgrade security at these facilities and ensure that chemical companies switch to less dangerous processes whenever possible.

We don't need another Bhopal in our own backyard.

Today's announcement by Attorney General Ashcroft and FBI Director Mueller is a sobering warning that we must remain alert to terrorist threats. But we must do more than just listen to what the Bush Administration says about these threats – we must also watch to see what the Administration does to reduce them.

In case after case, the Bush Administration has been long on rhetoric, but short on results.

I'll now respond any questions you may have.